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Extreme Cold May Result in Additional Road Closures

RIGBY – As extreme cold continues in East Idaho, the Idaho Transportation Department is asking motorists to plan ahead and check the 511.idaho.gov website before hitting the roads. “It’s vitally important that drivers are paying close attention to current conditions,” said ITD Public Information Officer Justin Smith. “We always try to keep roads open, but when conditions become unsafe for our plow drivers we have to close the roads to protect everyone.”

Smith also noted that drivers checking the 511 website or using the newly updated version of the 511 app might see a webcam of one portion of the road that looks fine, but other sections may not be safe. “With the changes in altitude at places like the Ashton Hill conditions can be vastly different from Idaho Falls or Henry’s Lake.”

Those changing conditions can also be dangerous. The National Weather Service announced over the weekend that wind chills are dropping to -15°F to -40°F. At -30°F exposed skin can freeze in as little as 10 minutes. That means motorists must be sure to have their vehicle serviced. A poorly maintained vehicle can leave someone stranded.

AAA notes (<https://exchange.aaa.com/safety/driving-advice/winter-driving-tips/>) several other precautions motorists should take:

- Keep a bundle of cold-weather gear in your car, such as extra food and water, warm clothing (including additional clothing for every passenger), a flashlight, a glass scraper, blankets, medications, and more.
- Make certain your tires are properly inflated and have plenty of tread.
- Keep at least half a tank of fuel in your vehicle at all times.
- Never warm up a vehicle in an enclosed area, such as a garage.
- Do not use cruise control when driving on any slippery surface, such as on ice and snow.
- Stay home and only go out if necessary. Even if you can drive well in bad weather, it’s better to avoid taking unnecessary risks by venturing out.

It is especially important to consider children, the disabled, and elderly who may be passengers. “Sometimes we forget that children and vulnerable adults do not have the ability to maintain body temperature. Kids like to go out without enough cold weather protection, but parents should ensure there are coats, hats, gloves, and other necessities are available if needed,” Smith said.

This winter has become more challenging as District 6 has lost a number of plow drivers leaving 17 vacant positions open. “We do have a few relief plow drivers to help with the vacancies, but it’s not enough to take the pressure off,” said Bryan Young. “This number includes employees who are retiring or are out for extended health reasons. We do have a few new hires, but they will not be 100% this winter.”

The vacant positions may make it necessary to close roads sooner than motorists may be used to. When fully staffed multiple plow drivers can work the same highway from both directions. However, with fewer plows on the road it may not be possible to keep a road open. This is especially the case where snowfall is heavy and strong winds are blowing.

ITD has also been dealing with numerous plow strikes and drivers making dangerous maneuvers around plows. So far 13 plows have been hit this season. Most of those incidents were related to drivers going too fast for conditions and passing plows on the right.

